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ST. AUGUSTINE AND THE ROMAN CLAIMS.

THESE is, perhaps, no other period of the early Church which affords so reliable a test of the Roman claim of supremacy as the life of the African Church at the beginning of the fifth century. If, indeed, the Roman theologians cannot detect evidence of an acceptance of their pretension by that date, it is confessedly discredited. If in the half century that falls between the death of Julian and the disruption of the Western Empire, when the church-life was so free and so eventful, there is no trace of a submission to the claim of the Roman see, the famous argument from tradition is completely broken. Not to the earlier days, when bishops and churches were so long isolated, nor to the later centuries, when the barbarian invasion had again distorted the course of development, should we look for the most cogent testimony. It is in the peaceful interval between the persecutions and the fall of Rome that we find the most authoritative expressions of the feeling of the early Church. And the African branch of the Church seems to have an especial interest in this regard. More than one Church had only relaxed its fervour and suffered intellectual decadence with the advent of prosperity. The African Church had risen from the humble and not very reputable structure that survived the last persecution to a commanding height in the Roman world. Besides Augustine of Hippo and Aurelius of Carthage, a dozen prelates of great moral, if not intellectual, distinction strengthened its synods and councils. Moreover, the course of its history in the first quarter of the fifth century afforded more than one occasion for an explicit consideration of the pretensions of the Bishop of Rome. There can hardly be a more suitable period in which to test the validity of the Ultramontane argument; and there is certainly no period at which we find the Roman claim rejected with greater vehemence.

St. Augustine of Hippo was at once the creator and the theologian of this most famous Church of the fifth century. When he entered the service of the Church in 391, it had not a single bishop of distinction,

and its population was almost lost amidst the multitude of Donatists, Manicheans, and Pagans. Within twenty years Augustine lifted it to the foremost place in the Christian world. Aurelius of Carthage, its chief bishop and statesman, invariably took inspiration from Augustine. From Augustine's seminary ten able and earnest bishops went out to various parts of Africa, and these pupils of his formed the nucleus of every general council. The action of the African Church in its golden age follows the development of Augustine's views with singular fidelity. It is, therefore, to Augustine and his colleagues that we look for the most weighty deliverance on the Roman claim in that age of exceptional freedom of intercommunication.

Augustine has told us very little—though that little is suggestive enough—about his first impression of the Eternal City and its Christian Church. He was never, at any time, the vicious youth the hagiographers have represented him to have been in his pre-Christian days, and the pleasures of the city rather disgusted him. Rome lived from end to end of the year, even whilst the barbarians were gathering thick about its enfeebled frontiers, either in the enjoyment or in the anticipation of its *circenses* and *munera*. Its patricians spent their substance on banquets to trains of vulgar parasites or entertainments of an idle and contemptible mob. A quarter of a million of its citizens spent the whole year in complete idleness: holding out shameless hands for public rations on the bread-steps, and earning only a few coins by the sale of their applause at the Circus, to be spent on dice or wine or the thickly-clustered *fornices* down the Subura. Augustine had long before given up the circus and the amphitheatre, and the Roman theatre had little intellectual attraction. But he must have watched with a cynical interest the struggle of religions in the city during the few months of his stay there. He came at the moment when Christianity was beginning in earnest its attack on the older religion. Prætextatus and Symmachus were in the middle of their historic struggle for the pagan altar in the Senate. Three other religions—those of Mithra, Cybele, and Isis—were hardly less conspicuous and popular. The Manicheans, to whom Augustine was still nominally attached, were fewer and more obscure. Augustine merely says that “the forest of conflicting sects” led him into sceptical thoughts. He turned to the philosophy of Carneades.

When he came back to Rome two years later, converted into an ardent believer, he was necessarily drawn more into the life of the Roman Church. He had not, indeed, intended to visit Rome, but political troubles forced him to wait a few months there. Yet once more Augustine is remarkably silent about Christian life at Rome, and the blank must be filled up from St. Jerome's ruthless descriptions of it. Jerome had by this time been driven from the city. The populace had threatened to pitch him into the Tiber, he says, and the clergy had made Rome impossible even for his ascetic temper. Pope Damasus,

also, had ceased to "tickle the ears of matrons," as his clergy put it, and rush about the fora in a gorgeous chariot, and give "banquets equal to those of the emperor," as Ammianus says. But the state of things which Jerome describes must have continued. In Jerome's time there was at least one oasis of piety in the Roman Church—the palace on the Aventine where Jerome gathered together his school of noble ladies. This was now all but broken up, and the Church presented an unattractive appearance. No sober historian would take quite at the letter Jerome's testimony to the morals, or absence of morals, of his fellow clergy; but when all reasonable allowance has been made the fact seems to remain that the Roman Church of the fourth century was conspicuously lacking in both moral and intellectual distinction.

But Augustine had not the type of mind that takes a dogma to be enfeebled because it has little ethical support. He must certainly have borne to Africa an unflattering estimate of the prestige of the Roman Church, but we shall not find this interfering with his judgment when direct occasion arises. In fact, it is almost at the beginning of Augustine's sacerdotal life that we find one of his allusions to Rome which is most fondly quoted by the Ultramontane theologian. In the ballad which he wrote in 391, for good Catholics to fling across the forum at their "separated brethren," he invites the Donatists to return to communion with the See of Rome. The verse has, of course, no bearing on the high personal pretensions of the Roman bishop,* but it evinces an absence of prejudice. Communion with Rome, the oldest Church in the west, was an obvious test of orthodoxy.

It is in connection with this Donatist schism that Augustine and his colleagues first reveal to us their non-acceptance of the Roman claim. This is no place to describe the origin of that famous schism, but a few words will explain the relation of Rome to it. M. de Pressensé and other "philosophic" historians have seen in its rise an outgrowth of the democratic spirit, and it is usually taken to have had a serious religious root. The truth is that it arose out of a sordid intrigue of the Carthaginian Church. A spiteful woman allied herself with two disappointed and covetous candidates for the episcopacy, and they called in a group of disreputable bishops who, for a weighty consideration, ordained a rival bishop and launched the great schism. The democratic pleasantries which are found at a later date—such as harnessing the wealthy orthodox to their own chariots, or putting respectable citizens in the place of the miller's ass, and so on—were no less accidental to its course than the theological contentions with which it was quickly clothed. However, this intrigue was remote, if well-authenticated, history in Augustine's day, when the two parties were separated by violent dogmatic differences (as to the value of a sacrament administered by an unworthy priest). In that situation

* It is worth noting that the name "pope" was given to all eminent bishops at that time. Jerome gives it to Augustine, Augustine to Ambrose, and so forth.

even the slenderest notion of there being some peculiar authority in the Roman see would have been eagerly employed. The historical and theological dispute was evidently hopeless. Nearly a century of discussion had brought them no nearer the end. It was only by a recourse to the secular arm and the enforcement of severe secular penalties that Augustine did eventually conquer. In the earlier days, when he yet shrank from the idea of persecution, he would have found a powerful implement in an acceptance of the Roman claim.

In point of historic fact the personal authority of the Bishop of Rome is never mentioned throughout the struggle. Rome was, by the nature of the controversy, on the side of the Cæcilianists (orthodox). Its struggle with St. Cyprian about the reiteration of sacraments was fresh in the memory. But this support of the Roman See is never claimed by Augustine to have any peculiar significance. It is uniformly associated with the support of Milan and the other European Sees. Nor may we suppose that Augustine merely refrained from attaching any especial weight to the opinion of the Roman bishop because this was not admitted by the schismatics. The Donatists did not recognize any force even in the collective judgment of the "transmarine" bishops. "This is a concern of the African Church," they said at the great Conference in 411; "let the transmarine Churches stand aside and communicate with the winner." Yet Augustine never ceases hurling at them this collective adherence of the European bishops. He would undoubtedly have done the same with the individual decision of the Bishop of Rome if he himself attached any peculiar importance to it. He barely acknowledges the sentimental dignity which clung to it as the one Apostolic See in the west. In 397 the African bishops asked the approval of the Bishops of Rome and Milan (the two being put on a quite equal ground) on a step they had taken in regard to the Donatists; and when the opinion of these prelates was adverse, they quietly disregarded it—though they sent further legates to convince them—and pursued their own course. In 411, again, the opinion of the Bishop of Rome was only quoted collectively with that of the other transmarine bishops. The one apparent case of deference to the Roman claim throughout the struggle was when the Bishop of Rome was asked to adjudicate on it in its early years. But this invitation came from the emperor, not the African Church, and was only addressed to the Roman bishop as an important and impartial neighbour.

Incidentally, one cannot help noting how strangely fallacious was the attempt, popular amongst the Roman party in the last century, to compare the Church of England to the Donatist schism. In the Donatist controversy both parties repudiated that idea of submission to Rome which is now the essence of the Anglican offence; nor is the Church of England in any sense isolated like the Donatist body. There is this amount of parallel: one Christian party in England

denies the validity of its opponents' sacraments and raises "altar against altar." But it is the Roman party that does this.

If, however, Augustine and his colleagues so strangely forgot the value of the Roman judgment at a time when it would have been peculiarly helpful, the Romanists may claim that they amended this in their dealing with the Pelagians. It is in this second great struggle that Augustine preached the sermon which concludes with his famous reference to Rome. The phrase "Rome has spoken: the cause is settled" is, of course, one of those artistic improvements on the authentic passage which one is apt to find in controversial works; but even Augustine's real words are totally misleading when taken out of their historical setting. To put the matter briefly, Rome had taken side with the heretic Pelagius, and as the Eastern Church seemed equally incompetent to see the gravity of the new doctrine, Augustine was deeply concerned. An imperial rescript of April 30th, 418, describes the heresy as "rampant in the city." There seemed a danger of Augustinianism becoming the heresy instead of Pelagianism. In 416 Augustine heard that the Greek bishops had refused to condemn Pelagius. He at once summoned the African bishops to synods at Carthage and Mileve, and obtained a condemnation of the heresy. But the African Church could not, with any dignity and effectiveness, stand alone in the matter, and an appeal was made to Pope Innocent to join the censure. Augustine himself wrote the letters which went in the name of the two synods, as well as a third letter to Innocent which was signed by himself and Aurelius, Alypius, Evodius, and Possidius, his most devoted followers. The See of Milan was no longer of importance; Ambrose was long dead, and the court had fallen on evil days. It was essential to Augustine's success that he should win the support of the Romans, and it is not surprising that he at this time puts the prestige of the Roman See as high as conscience will permit him. In these letters occur his strongest expressions in the direction of the Romanist contention—though they are curiously overlooked by Hurter in his *Theologia Dogmatica*. The signatories pray that "the authority of the Apostolic See be added to their own modest statutes," and that Innocent, whom "the Lord, by a special favour of His grace, has placed in the Apostolic See, and given such a character in our days that we should be guilty of negligence if we failed to suggest to thy holiness what seems good for the Church," should "apply his pastoral diligence to the great dangers that menace the infirm members of Christ." Innocent's reply naturally breathes the dignity of the sovereign pontiff in every line. He takes remarkable pains to point out that they are only following a time-honoured custom in appealing to Rome, whilst his delight at the novelty beams from the whole letter. He fully concurred with their censure, and it is on this occasion that the well-known sermon (No. 131) was delivered. Augustine's real words were: "Already the decisions of two councils

"have been sent to the Apostolic See and a rescript has reached us. "The cause is finished: would that the error were similarly ended." It is convenient for popular controversy to omit Augustine's reference to the two councils and throw the whole credit of the termination on the fact that "Rome had spoken." For Augustine the force lay clearly in the joint enactment, and in the fact that the favourers of the heresy had been repressed at Rome.*

But the slighter impropriety of putting into Augustine's mouth the impressive "Roma locuta est" is negligible in comparison with the habit of ignoring the further course of the controversy. At the very moment when Augustine, on the 23rd of September, was assuring his Carthaginian hearers that the cause was finished, a vessel was speeding from Ostia with a reversal of the Papal sentence. Innocent had died in March, and been succeeded by the Greek Zosimus. Cœlestius, the companion of Pelagius, flew to Rome, and obtained a hearing before Zosimus and his clergy. The Roman bishop at once wrote to tell the Africans he had failed to discover any justification of their strictures, and to chide them for their uncharitable haste. After some pompous remarks about the dignity of his See he concluded with this comment on Augustine's zeal: "I admonished Cœlestius and all the clergy who were present that these ensnaring questions and foolish strifes" [considered so grave by his predecessor], "which destroy rather than build up, proceed from an idle curiosity, each one making perverse use of his talent and immoderate eloquence." Augustine had hardly time to digest this when he received a yet stronger epistle. Pelagius had next appealed to Zosimus, and been completely absolved. He was pronounced "a good Catholic" and "of unquestionable faith." Zosimus and his clergy had "scarcely been able to restrain their tears" at the thought that so holy and admirable a man had been condemned.

The subsequent proceedings of the African bishops are "not recorded." Mediæval prudence has spared posterity the pain of reading them at length. One indication has survived, a passage in the *Contra Collatorem* (c.v.) of Prosper. From this we learn that a large synod of 214 African bishops was hastily summoned, and a reply was forwarded to Zosimus. This letter has been "lost," save for one passage that Prosper has preserved: "We hereby ordain" [*constituimus . . . manere*: Hefele weakens this in his translation] "that the sentence which Innocent passed on Pelagius and Cœlestius remains in force until they profess," etc. So much for their deference to Roman authority. But there is good evidence showing that they also appealed to the Emperor, and obtained a strong Imperial rescript against the Pelagians. Whether he was moved by the language of the Africans or the sentiments of the court, or both, Zosimus immediately wrote a fresh letter to the African Church. The

* The words "Roma locuta; causa finita" are not attributed to Augustine in any version of his sermons. Catholic writers (cf. Cardinal von Rauscher, Dr. Specht, etc.) merely contend they justly epitomise the actual quotation, which I give in the text.

letter opens with a quite humorous reminder of Papal infallibility—recalling the titles of “pious, victorious, and triumphant emperors” which Honorius gives himself and his colleagues within a few weeks of the fall of Rome. “Although,” says Zosimus, “the tradition of our fathers has conferred such authority on the Apostolic See that no one would dare contend with its judgment,” and so on. Hurter actually includes this passage, written under such circumstances, amongst his historical proofs of the Roman claim. Coming presently to the point, Zosimus is astonished to hear that the Africans imagine he has declared in favour of Cœlestius and Pelagius. He had merely withheld his judgment, in view of the gravity of the case; he is still undecided, but hints that he may condemn. The letter reached the African bishops just as they were assembling for a fresh synod. Its virtual retractation seems to have relieved the strain of the situation, and they were content to formulate their views in a number of canons, which they sent on to Rome. A few weeks later the Imperial spears afforded a fresh argument against the Pelagians, and Bishop Zosimus and the priest Sixtus (the future Pope) realised at length their pernicious errors. Amidst the ringing scorn of some of the ablest of the Italian bishops Zosimus now sent out an unequivocal condemnation of the heresy.

When Döllinger appeals to Augustine against the dogma of papal supremacy, Father Hurter replies that Augustine’s conduct during the Pelagian controversy shows he admitted it. He refers chiefly to the famous sermon, and completely ignores its historic sequel. When one considers the whole story, one appreciates the justness of Döllinger’s appeal.

But an incident occurred a few years later that puts the attitude of the African bishops beyond all controversy. I have mentioned the African Council of May 1st, 418. In the 17th canon of this Council the African bishops brusquely declare that in future no priest or deacon who appeals to “a transmarine see” against his bishop will be readmitted to communion in Africa. This was the beginning of the supreme and definitive struggle of the Africans with the Roman ambition. Urbanus of Sicca had deposed one of his clergy, the priest Apiarius, for improper conduct. Apiarius appealed to Rome, and Zosimus, flattered by the appeal, acquitted him of the charge and threatened Urbanus with excommunication if he did not reinstate him. Hence the canon. But Zosimus now sent a fussy and pompous Italian bishop, Faustinus, to confer with the Africans and insist on the restoration of Apiarius. The Italian legate arrived at Carthage after most of the bishops had left, and Aurelius, Augustine, and fourteen other bishops were finishing the detail business of the preceding synod. Aurelius quickly summoned the neighbouring bishops to meet the legate. The Africans at once asked on what ground the Roman See based its interference, and Faustinus (quoting Zosimus) appealed to two canons

of the Nicene Council. The Africans referred to their authentic copy of the Nicene canons, and were amazed to find no trace of the two quoted by Zosimus. The discussion threatened to take an uncomplimentary turn, but Augustine persuaded his colleagues to admit the canons provisionally and send to the east for other copies of the Nicene records.

The bishops of Alexandria and Constantinople at once confirmed the African version of the canons, but the situation was saved for the time by the submission of Apiarius.* Augustine had been sent down to Sicca to investigate the charge—this is the so-called “commission from Zosimus” which one reads of in his Catholic biographers—and the priest pleaded guilty and was transferred to another church in Urban’s *parœcia*. However, Faustinus lingered at Carthage, and was confirmed in his commission by Boniface, when Zosimus died on the 26th of December, 418. On the 25th of May a general synod of the African bishops met at Carthage. Faustinus was irritated at their independence and their scepticism about the canons, and adopted a more arrogant tone than ever. Once more the short-hand record of the proceedings has been “lost,” but we have the letter which was afterwards written to Boniface by the Council. They tell Boniface of the conclusions arrived at “in charity, indeed, but not without laborious “altercation.” If these canons had been found in their copies, they say, they “would have been spared certain intolerable things they do “not care to mention;” but they “trust they will not have to endure “that pompousness any longer.” This letter must be read in Labbé or Mansi. Hefele contrives greatly to enfeeble its virility in his *Conciliengeschichte*, and his English translator still further advances the process. Thus, where the Africans merely say: *Prior autem coepiscopus noster Siccensis Urbanus, quod in eo [Apiario] corrigendum visum est, sine ulla dubitatione correxit*, Hefele translates: *Zuvor noch habe Bischof Urbanus von Sicca, ohne zu zögern, an sich verbessert, was ihm der Papst angesonnen*, and the English version makes them say Urbanus “had complied with the Pope’s “request.” Thus are the harsher accents of history attuned to pious ears. The letter loses entirely its most important character in Hefele’s translation, or epitome (but with quotation marks). This letter reached Boniface in 419. Three years later we find him writing (ep. xv.) unabashed to an eastern bishop: “No one ever resisted the “dignity of the Apostolic See, for its judgment cannot be called into “question; no one ever rebelled against it without being judged by “his own deed.” And we find Father Hurter including this passage, like the previous one from Zosimus, amongst his “proofs” of the Roman claim.

But the most explicit declaration of all—as explicit a judgment on

* The two canons were really made at the later Council of Sardica. Hefele would have them to be of equal authority with those of Nicæa, but the Africans clearly thought otherwise.

the Roman claim as one can conceive—was reserved for Boniface's successor. Apiarius fell into disgrace once more a few years later, and was again excommunicated. He fled to Rome, where the bishop Celestine I., admitted him to communion (so indecent was the haste to assert the prerogatives of the Roman See), and the Africans were insulted by having the same Faustinus dispatched to demand his restoration. By this time the canons had arrived from Alexandria and Constantinople, and the Africans hastened to the synod. "There were stormy sittings for three days," as they afterwards declare. The records have "not been preserved," but the letter which the bishops afterwards wrote to Celestine has been discovered, and it suffices to repel the last shade of doubt as to the African attitude. It seems that Apiarius silenced the Italians at length by confessing his misdeeds, but the bishops decided to follow up the legate's retreat to Rome with a letter that should prevent any repetition of the legation. Hefele again weakens the dogmatic force of this letter in his translation. It is a pity that even the first historians of the Roman Church cannot refrain from the practice. Even in Hefele's epitome—I revert to it so often because it is the only generally accessible version—the letter is, nevertheless, strong; in the original text (in Labbé or Mansi) it is absolutely scornful of the Roman claim. Something is said in the early part of the letter about Faustinus "insulting the whole assembly by pretending to assert certain privileges of the Roman See," but the second half of the letter must be quoted in full. I translate it literally.

After this proper discharge of our duty of saluting you, we earnestly entreat that in future you will not listen too readily to those who come to you from here, nor receive into communion those whom we have excommunicated; for thy Venerableness will easily find that this has already been enjoined by the Council of Nicæa. If it seems to thee that the direction refers to inferior clerics and the laity, how much more urgently must it be meant for the bishops, lest such as have been suspended from communion in their own provinces should seem to be either hastily or improperly restored to communion by thy Holiness. We also trust that thy Holiness will reject (as becomes thee) the improper appeals of priests and other clerics. There is no definition of the fathers that sanctions this encroachment on the African Church; the Nicene decrees very clearly commit, not only the inferior clergy, but the bishops themselves, to the care of their metropolitans. For they most prudently and justly provided that all affairs should be disposed of in the places where they arise; nor did they think that any province would be refused that grace of the Holy Spirit whereby the priests of Christ may prudently discern and hold fast to equity; especially as any priest is free to appeal to a provincial, or even a general, council, if he be dissatisfied with a judgment. Unless, indeed, there is anyone who can think our God will grant his inspiration of just discernment to one single person [unicuilibet] and

deny it to so many priests assembled in council. Again, how can the judgment of a transmarine see be sound, seeing that it cannot summon the necessary witnesses, from reasons of sex, or age, or other hindrance? Nor do we find it laid down in any synod of the fathers that legates should be sent by thy Holiness. For the canons thou didst send by Bishop Faustinus, purporting to be of the Nicene Council, are not in accord with the more accurate copies which are accepted by Cyril, bishop of the Alexandrian Church, and Atticus, bishop of Constantinople, and which we sent to thy predecessor, Boniface, of venerable memory, by the same priest Innocent and Subdeacon Marcellinus, by whom we received them; in these we have found nothing of the kind. Do not, then, send clerics to execute thy will to those who are in authority; lest we seem to introduce the empty pride of the world into the Church of Christ, which offers the light of simplicity and humility to those who seek God. As to our brother Faustinus (for the wretched Apiarius has already been expelled from the Church of Christ for his crimes) we have confidence in the good will and moderation of thy Holiness that our fraternal charity will not be taxed with his further presence in Africa.

The letter is signed by Aurelius and many other bishops and (in general) "the rest of the bishops who are present at the General Council of Africa." It has not been written by Augustine, and the fact that neither Augustine's name nor those of any of his pupils are explicitly given is not without significance. Probably Augustine disapproved of the bitter and contemptuous language. But this in no way invalidates the document as a proof of the African feeling when the Roman claim is explicitly laid before them. Here, in a full Council of the African Church, by far the best organised and most weighty branch of western Christianity, we have the Roman pretension solemnly and vehemently rejected. Beside this it is a waste of time to extort subtle and ingenious meanings from the vague references to Peter and his successors that are found in the early fathers.

Augustine himself is singularly reticent about these weighty incidents in the life of his Church. The year before this final declaration, in 423, he had had a direct correspondence with Pope Celestine, but his letter has no dogmatic force. A bishop appointed by Augustine had gone astray and been deposed. He had appealed to Rome, and it appears that the Roman bishop was trying by the help of the Imperial spears to make the people of Fussala accept him once more. Augustine does not seem to discover any other feature of authority in Celestine beyond this threatened use of the legionaries, and he talks of resigning if Celestine does not "co-operate" with him to bring about a peaceful solution. His last reference to Rome is found in his *Retractations* (I. 21). He here points out that whereas in an early work he had interpreted the text "Thou art Peter," etc., in

the Roman sense, he had in his later works uniformly explained it in a sense quite hostile to the Roman claim. "The reader may choose "which sense he thinks more probable," is his final word. But in all his later writings he contends that no special prerogatives were given to the Apostle Peter, to say nothing of his successors (cf. *Enarratio in psal.* 108; *Tractatus in Joannem*, 50, 118, and 124; and sermon 149, n. 6).

Six years after the famous synod of 424 the African Church was extinct. The Vandals made almost a wilderness from the Pillars of Hercules to Carthage. In Spain, Gaul, and Italy, the promising Churches of the early part of the fifth century were only a little less disorganised. The shadow of the Dark Ages stole swiftly over the land. In a few centuries more Rome could make use of the forged Decretals. In comparison with the ages that immediately followed, as well as with the preceding ages of the persecutions, the brilliant African Church of 410 to 430 was in a unique position to voice the feeling of early Christianity. And it gave utterance to that feeling in unmistakable accents when the Roman claim of supremacy was put clearly before it.

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